

A PLANETARY PANDEMIC

This number of NLR opens with a set of texts on the COVID-19 crisis. Coursing round the world, the virus plays the role of an etching acid that reveals the lineaments—political, economic, social, cultural—of the uneven landscape beneath. Less lethal than such zoonotic forerunners as SARS or MERS, as Mike Davis spells out below, it is highly infectious, ripping through our 7-billion-strong species in a matter of months. It is this speed that motivates the lockdowns of public activity which have transformed the COVID-19 outbreak into a socio-economic disaster. Famously, the initial vectors of contagion were the networks of globalization, cultural and economic: manufacturing supply chains, tourism, international evangelical gatherings and overseas students scattered its microbes from Wuhan to Qom and greater Milan; pilgrims and ski resorts helped to disperse it. Proselytizing Muslims (the Tablighi Jamaat) and Christians (the Seoul-based Shincheonji Church of Jesus), with their fellow-worshippers in Mulhouse and Rio, were mega-spreaders. Students from Wuhan's giant university complex travelled back to their homes in South and Southeast Asia. As NLR goes to press, the pandemic is making its way across the US, from NYC to Detroit and New Orleans, and seeding itself through Latin America and Africa, where the impact of co-infection with endemic deadly diseases like TB, malaria and HIV is still unknown.

Yet contra these global networks, the political agencies taking charge, one by one, are nation-states, summoned back from the secondary status to which laissez-faire ideology had consigned them—and now resuming, as if in war time, their foundational responsibility for public safety. The virus has been a Rorschach test for ruling parties and national-political cultures alike. In the US, a bellowing hypochondriac in the White House, ambitious state governors honing their profiles, a bi-partisan Congressional bail-out for big business and tougher sanctions on Iran. In the UK, Churchillian sentiment plastering over critical shortages and medics' deaths. In the EU, assorted neoliberal regimes squabbling over how to press home their prior political agendas. Below, contributions from Mumbai, Surabaya and São Paulo illuminate the particular character of the unfolding crises in Modi's India, Jokowi's Indonesia and Bolsonaro's Brazil; an Iranian scholar of public health details her country's struggles to combat the virus under geopolitical lockdown; and Taggart Murphy reflects on the relevance of deep-structural geo-cultural contrasts between East and West.

Across this landscape, COVID-19 has laid bare the vertiginous social divides—notoriously, New York's: laden SUVs heading for the Hamptons, while overwhelmed hospitals in Queens fill unmarked graves on Hart Island—even

as these are deepened by the economic fall-out of the lockdowns. In the rich world, it reveals the shallow nature of the post-2008 recoveries: the growth in low-paid service-sector jobs has been catastrophically reversed, with 10 million jobless Americans scrambling to register for benefits in the first two weeks of the shutdown, and estimates of between 15 per cent (Goldman Sachs) and 30 per cent (St Louis Federal Reserve) for the coming rise in unemployment and economic inactivity. The negative-demand shock may cut firms' revenues by 50–90 per cent, and whole sectors—retail, hospitality, sport, live entertainment—have zero earnings. How much of the G20's promised \$8 trillion in loans and credit guarantees percolates down to small businesses and laid-off workers remains to be seen. The demand shock from the West hammers a world economy still struggling to recover from the end of the commodities super-cycle and burdened by debt, much of it denominated in strengthening dollars. Oil has sunk below \$35 a barrel; remittances and tourism revenues have been slashed. Welfare is minimal across most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, where lockdowns are enforced with lathis and sjamboks. With further waves of the virus expected over the next six to eighteen months, global supply shocks have yet to kick in.

In an intervention from the philosophers' debate in Italy, Marco D'Eramo's contribution here discusses the consequences of the 'states of exception' now imposed across 170 countries. The cultural response to the coronavirus—the myriad personal and political reflections, of which we publish an outstanding example in an extract from film-maker Ai Xiaoming's 'Wuhan Diary', a multi-media record from the epicentre of the pandemic—was born online, entangled with the data harvests reaped from our laptops and phones by capital and the state. The world after COVID-19 seems set to be one of heavily indebted, austerity-prone states, bailed-out corporations, hungry, impoverished working classes and expanded personal-data surveillance. Yet two things may have changed for the better. First: albeit in authoritarian fashion, governments for the first time in generations have had to put public health above profit-making; if that can happen once, it can happen again. Second: for many, the crisis has provided a rare experience of thinking globally, beyond the walls of our own cultures. It has become ordinary to conceive our species as a whole, under external threat; but also to feel for doctors and nurses in Italy or Iran, to have a sense of the distance from Wuhan to Qom, to ask how they do things in Sweden or Korea. Hopefully, some of that will last.